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# Exploring Relational Ethics and Care: A Longitudinal Study of a Hong Kong Cellist's Marriage Disintegration and Identity Change

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## Exploring Relational Ethics and Care: A Longitudinal Study of a Hong Kong Cellist's Marriage Disintegration and Identity Change

### Abstract

I am a survivor of divorce. When I visited Hong Kong, a mutual friend introduced me to a cellist going through a divorce as a participant for my research which investigates music learning and identity of Chinese musicians. My research took a different path because I decided to explore how she constructed meaning through divorce, leading to her identity change. I referred her to counselling and supported her through regular messaging. Research is more than just data collection; the wounded-healer standing by the wounded is therapeutic for both of us. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study reports our conversations, including two face-to-face semi-structured interviews and messaging over eighteen months. Four themes emerged about the cellist's understanding of her marital conflict: an urge for financial security and materialistic pursuit; faith abandonment; prioritizing children's education and parenthood; and diverging lives. This longitudinal study explored relational ethics, researcher care and research as emancipation. It acknowledged the freedom and choice-making responsibility of the researcher who extended the project boundary to improve the wellbeing of the participant. This is the essence of qualitative research, with unanticipated life-changing consequences that transform the researcher, the participant, and global readers who share a similar experience.

### Keywords

Marriage Disintegration, Identity Change, Relational Ethics and Care, Research As Emancipation, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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## **Exploring Relational Ethics and Care: A Longitudinal Study of a Hong Kong Cellist's Marriage Disintegration and Identity Change**

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*I am a survivor of divorce. When I visited Hong Kong, a mutual friend introduced me to a cellist going through a divorce as a participant for my research which investigates music learning and identity of Chinese musicians. My research took a different path because I decided to explore how she constructed meaning through divorce, leading to her identity change. I referred her to counselling and supported her through regular messaging. Research is more than just data collection; the wounded-healer standing by the wounded is therapeutic for both of us. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study reports our conversations, including two face-to-face semi-structured interviews and messaging over eighteen months. Four themes emerged about the cellist's understanding of her marital conflict: an urge for financial security and materialistic pursuit; faith abandonment; prioritizing children's education and parenthood; and diverging lives. This longitudinal study explored relational ethics, researcher care and research as emancipation. It acknowledged the freedom and choice-making responsibility of the researcher who extended the project boundary to improve the wellbeing of the participant. This is the essence of qualitative research, with unanticipated life-changing consequences that transform the researcher, the participant, and global readers who share a similar experience. Keywords: Marriage Disintegration, Identity Change, Relational Ethics and Care, Research as Emancipation, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

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### **Bumping into Rebecca on a Hong Kong Train**

In December 2015, I visited the University of Hong Kong. While there, I was asked by a mutual friend if I wanted to meet Rebecca (pseudonym) who had been separated from her husband for a year. Rebecca was in her mid-forties with two daughters both under the age of ten at that time. My friend thought that I needed musician participants in my PhD research project, and Rebecca could use some support from me as a divorce survivor and counsellor. At my friend's place, I greeted Rebecca briefly as she left the house. A few days later, I bumped into her on a train ride. Incidentally I asked if she would be interested in being interviewed. At that time, I was engaged in a project investigating the lived experiences of Chinese musicians. I was granted approval by the ethics committee at my University to conduct research among global Chinese musicians with project number CF13/899-2013000435. Adhering to ethical research practice which required me to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality, I emailed her the Explanatory Statement, Interview Schedule and Consent Form of my project for her to consider and confirm her expressed interest to take part in my research.

Rebecca was a performing cellist working with established orchestras before she had children; she later became a house-bound wife slowly losing her identity as a professional musician-educator. Although I was told by my friend that Rebecca was having trouble dealing with her disintegrating marriage, nothing prepared me for the relational shift that happened in our first interview. It was easy for Rebecca to open herself up to me because I was a stranger

who lives aboard, and had no prior knowledge of her life and work in Hong Kong; or perhaps she did not feel threatened because I had been through divorce myself. On that morning, she hesitated momentarily when she first began to steer the interview toward her marriage problems. Rebecca cried as she spoke about the trauma associated with her pending divorce. My heart sank so low and I was reminded of what it felt like to be betrayed. Rebecca choked with heavy sobbing, and symbolically I was drowning in her tears. I knew this was not a space for her to be polite; but I struggled to disallow myself from being who and what I am—the dual identity of researcher-counsellor. I recalled a rule in therapy that “what’s in the way is the way.” I made that space to be totally about her; disengaging myself from the role of a researcher and abandoning my personal agenda. In this psychodynamic flow, feelings about all relationships could be safely disclosed. I knew that the interview had to take its natural path; my intellectual mind temporarily shut down, I remained silent and allowed the moment of sorrow and the tears to evaporate in its own time, its own pace and into its own space.

### **The Self in Reflexive Research**

Reflexivity is self-appraisal throughout all phases of research; it is recognised as a crucial strategy in generating knowledge through qualitative methods across disciplines (Berger, 2015). It is the process of a continual dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality, and the acknowledgement that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Stronach et al., 2007). Examples of relevant researcher’s positioning include gender, age, race, linguistic tradition, value systems, beliefs, affiliation, personal biases and experiences (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Padgett, 2008). These positions play different roles and can impact the research in three ways:

1. Access to the field can be easier if participants think that the researchers are insiders as culture-bearers who understand their experiences (De Tona, 2006).
2. A good researcher-participant relationship occurs when researchers are aware of their own thoughts and reactions to the conversations; this can facilitate data collection in which participants are more willing to disclose personal information, thus generating deep and meaningful data (Valentine, 2007).
3. Findings and conclusions are shaped by the worldviews of the researchers, and their filtering of the data gathered (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006).

The goals and functions of reflexivity are to monitor the tension between involvement and detachment in the researcher-participant relationship in order to enhance credibility, rigor and ethics in research (Gemignani, 2011; Pillow, 2003). The absence of reflexivity can lead to acceptance of apparent information and obscuring the unexpected possibilities (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Strategies of reflexivity include repeated interviews with the same participants, prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, peer review, back-talk focus group, keeping researcher journal, creating audit trail of researcher’s reasoning, judgement and emotional reactions (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Frisina, 2006; Smith, 1999).

As a researcher, my main task was to investigate the participant’s music learning experience. With my dual role as a counsellor, I made a conscious choice to shift the focus of my study to exploring the complex issues associating with the participant’s change of identity resulting from her marriage disintegration. This also aligned with my personal interest and professional work as a counsellor working with tertiary students, migrant families, women and young families. In this case, I share many characteristics as a divorced Chinese Christian

musician-educator with my participant. Based on my own experience, I am familiar with the topic under study and the cultural assumptions associated with it. I have the advantage to detect implied content, hear the unsaid and probe my participants more efficiently; but I am mindful that I may overlook certain aspects of my participants' experiences, block out other voices or impose my own beliefs on the data due to such familiarity (Berger, 2015; Cloke et al., 2000). As a therapist, I maintain an emphatic distance and take a non-exploitative position toward my participants. This can minimise the negative effects of power or intimidation, take care of relational ethics and build rapport (Josselson, 2007; Valentine, 2007). I am constantly alert on how my presence can shape the conversations and rigorously reflect on my own attitudes and behaviours in my interactions with my participants (Drake, 2010). Inevitably, this study drifts between reporting the study, reporting about the study and simultaneously interpreting the verbatim data with my insider-outsider interpretations and reflections. This is the essence of phenomenological research.

### **IPA: Researching to meet Participant's Needs**

In-depth interview was found to be therapeutic and beneficial for the healing of wounds (Beck, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994; Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994; Murray, 2003). In order to allow the participant's unheard voices to be heard, IPA case study approach was employed for the exploration of the participant's lived experiences. This method provides a rich way of engaging with and understanding other people's worlds, as well as revealing personal relationships and processes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher is expected not to have a well-delineated conceptualisation of the phenomenon; rather, this conceptualisation emerges from the interaction between participants and researcher (Sidani & Sechrest, 1996). The goal is to understand the complexities of experiences from the participants' own points of view (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The researcher's job is to record and interpret the personal lived experiences of the participant while engaging in an intensive learning process where new knowledge is achieved (Radnor, 2001). Data analysis can be a transformative learning experience for the researcher because it generates meaning that transforms perspectives and actions (Krauss, 2005).

Typical to IPA research, repeated semi-structured conversational interviews were used in this longitudinal study to record transitional changes. Semi-structured interviews allow a certain degree of free flow and diversion from the main area of investigation (Smith, 1999). Instead of pursuing Rebecca's music learning experience, I let Rebecca talk about her identity transformation. I advised Rebecca to see local counsellors and kept in touch with her through regular messaging. It became clear to me that she needed someone not in her local friendship circle to provide additional emotional support. Rebecca might have experienced the phenomenon of "the farthest is the closest"—I was geographically a few thousands of miles away from her, but mentally we became allies and she felt secluded in my safety net. As a counsellor, I need to maintain "emphatic distance" (Valentine, 2007). I had a dilemma of wanting to cultivate an honest relationship with her but feared disclosure of my own divorce could cause an issue of boundary violation. Although I was not obliged, I felt compelled to share my feelings with Rebecca because she asked about my struggles. I revealed my failure to her so she did not feel intimidated by my recovery; and I believed reducing the negative effects of power were helpful to her (Josselson, 2007). I realised that part of avoiding of sharing my experiences served my own need for self-protection rather than hers (Berger, 2015). Rebecca then shared with me her anxiety related to her separation, sexuality, offspring wellbeing, financial instability, housing rearrangement and the sudden passing of her step-father. I decided to do a longitudinal study about Rebecca's changing identity by exploring

how she constructed meaning through her divorce journey. This study also explored the relational ethics and care of the researcher as the research unfolded.

### **Data Collection, Interview Schedule and Analysis**

In the first interview, I asked Rebecca questions from the interview schedule with the aim to investigate the enablers and barriers to her music learning throughout her life course. I explored Rebecca's first musical encounter with the cello in her childhood, her demographics including her extended family's socioeconomic background, her parents' views about Western music and cello learning in relation to Rebecca's career pathways, as well as her actual music learning experiences at schools and tertiary institutions. During the interview, Rebecca had the need to talk about her familial and relational difficulties with her husband and his extramarital affairs. Three months later, I had to attend a conference in Washington DC; I arranged to have a stopover in Hong Kong, so I could interview Rebecca again. This paper reports on two semi-structured interviews, and my ongoing messaging with Rebecca for eighteen months which served as online interviews in virtual space (Beck, 2005). Methodologically, strategies of reflexivity have been included in this qualitative study: I had a researcher journal for self-appraisal and kept audit trail of my reasoning, judgement and emotional reactions to our conversations (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Smith, 1999). The interviews were transcribed and sent to Rebecca for member checking; Rebecca and I are engaged in ongoing dialogue, so I am aware of her circumstantial changes and the continuous negotiation of her identity. The dataset included interview transcripts, researcher journal, my email correspondences and messaging with Rebecca; I had prolonged engagement with the data before my analysis commenced.

I analysed the combined data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA studies explores in depth how participants make sense of their personal and social world, their interpretations of their lived experiences, significant events, and pivotal life changes as well as the researcher's interpretations of participant's process of sense-making (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2014). The analysis is iterative and occurs in inductive cycles which involve these steps: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, and looking for patterns across cases. It is a joint product of the participant and the analyst who has a potential reader in mind (Smith, 2008). The analysis was triangulated by a senior colleague acted as an external auditor who independently examined the data in depth and we discussed the findings together (Frisina, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). After presenting Rebecca's childhood socioeconomic background, the four emergent themes that determined her marriage disintegration and identity change will be discussed: an urge for financial security and materialistic pursuit; faith abandonment; prioritizing children's education and parenthood; and diverging lives.

### **Rebecca's Childhood Socioeconomic Background**

Rebecca's mother is an Indonesian Chinese who was born in Indonesia, and was sent back to mainland China for her tertiary education by her parents. During the mother's second year of study, the Cultural Revolution began in China and her education was disrupted. When Rebecca turned two, her family came to Hong Kong. A year later, Rebecca's father suddenly passed away from a ruptured liver, so Rebecca had no siblings. Her mother was blamed by the in-laws that she might have fed her father with bad food that caused his death. Rebecca and her mother had to survive extreme poverty on their own. The mother worked as a labourer; half of her wages was spent on rent, half on food but it was still not enough. Rebecca's mother often took some of her skirts to the pawn shop to get money for food. If the clothes were not sold, they would have had empty stomachs.

Rebecca's mother was lucky to marry her second husband two years later and the family's financial hardship ceased. Rebecca's step-father worked as a driver; her mother worked at home as a tailor and her eyesight aged prematurely. Rebecca's mother was a very bright student before the discontinuance of her tertiary education; she held high aspirations in her only daughter's future because her own was ruined by the political upheaval. Both parents understood very well what it was like to be earning minimum wages through hard labour; and they wanted their only child to have a better life than theirs (Lopez, 2001).

### **An Urge for Financial Security and Materialistic Pursuit**

In the 1970s, Hong Kong was a developing industrial city; ordinary unskilled people engaged in manufacturing work with the motto of more labour, more money (Faure & Lee, 2004). Chinese parents commonly invest in their children's education as a way to elevate the socioeconomic status of the family (Li, 2001, 2002, 2006). Rebecca experienced financial hardship as a child and she attributed her later financial security to her instrumental music learning. Rebecca worked very hard to break free from a working-class family to become a professional. She recalled:

From a very tender age, I learnt that money is very important. I understand if I want to move away from poverty; I must work very hard in my studies to elevate my status. It was my only hope. During primary Grade 4, the Hong Kong Music Office held a promotion concert at our school to encourage students to learn an orchestral instrument. I considered myself extremely lucky to have learnt the cello. Having the opportunity to learn an instrument was my real fortune because it changed my life.

Evidently, Rebecca regarded cello learning was her "only hope to move away from poverty," and she worked very hard to reach her goal in order to escape further sufferings associated with familial financial hardship. When Rebecca started Form one (age 13), the financial situation of her family had improved. Instead of doing sewing at home, her mother ran a small garment shop. Rebecca began learning the piano because there was a piano shop next to her mother's shop. After Rebecca completed Form 6, her scores did not reach the bench mark for tertiary entrance. Rebecca used her Form 5 marks to apply a Music Pre-U course at a university; she repeated Form 6 and did Form 7 there. When Rebecca finally began her tertiary music education, she had passed eighth grade cello and piano at The Royal School of Music in Hong Kong. Rebecca remembered that her parents could afford to pay for her tertiary education because the fees were only a few thousand dollars per year. Although the parents were not happy with Rebecca's music pathway, they knew this could be her ticket to a better financial future.

As a young adult, Rebecca was not expected to earn money through part-time jobs. Her mother wanted her to focus on her tertiary studies to secure a future white-collar job. Rebecca said that her mother thought studying music could not bring her daughter a secure income and to the mother, "teaching the cello was not a real job." Rebecca reported that if she did not receive a fee-exemption scholarship to do further music studies in the US; her mother would not have allowed her to go overseas at all. Rebecca maintained that acquiring the ability to play the cello expertly "was her only hope" to escape poverty; so she tried very hard to gain graduate music qualifications overseas which would most likely lead to a financially promising career. Rebecca might have wanted to prove that her mother was wrong thinking that music could not lead to a "real job." The issue of financial security was Rebecca's prior consideration besides wanting to have an intellectually challenging and aesthetically rewarding career.

Rebecca spent three years completing a master's degree in Oklahoma. While abroad, Rebecca worked on weekends playing in gigs to generate money to support herself, because her scholarship and the allowances her parents sent were only the bare minimum. The value of the dollar or the importance of hard work was further reinforced in Rebecca's mind during her time in the US (Lopez, 2001). She knew she needed to be financially self-reliant to relieve the ongoing burden on her parents, and to become a respectable citizen in the society.

Upon graduation, Rebecca returned to Hong Kong and began teaching as a junior tutor at a tertiary institution, and actively playing in ensembles as a professional cellist. Slowing building up her reputation and workload, Rebecca's income equated to a full-time job. Rebecca married her junior music classmate Tim (pseudonym). Both musicians went to the US for further studies and the young couple cultivated a dedicated interest in accumulating wealth through working six days a week. They initially ran a small music school where they both taught string instruments. The couple later expanded their business to employ contracted tutors and formed a full-scale orchestra that perform in concerts regularly. They also had a full-time administrative staff to look after the operations of the school. Rebecca reported that Tim had suffered financial hardship as a child. He had developed an urge to spend a lot of the family's monthly earnings on high-tech electronic gadgets, Rebecca continued to explain:

Maybe the pressure of work and spending a major portion of his waking hours earning a huge amount of money to support a big family were getting too much for him. Our monthly budget is \$10,000, our actual expenses are at least \$80,000 HKD including running the music school, paying home loan, food and bills, school and tuition fees for extracurricular activities, and recreation and entertainment costs.

The average Australian cost of living for a household of four including one pet is \$4,745 AUD per month (Australian Immigration and Visa Services, 2016) whereas the American equivalent is \$5466 USD (American Career Trends, 2016). These figures are presented as a reference for discussion and they do not reflect the actual expenditure of families that have individualised needs outside the norm. Although it is common for ordinary Hong Kong people to employ live-at-home maids, Rebecca's family is not normative because it houses an extended family member, a maid and three pets besides their family of four. The fact that Rebecca's family had a minimal expenditure of \$80,000 HKD was considered quite high in both America and Australia. It equated to \$10,240 USD per month— about twice the American cost of living, and \$16,000 AUD per month which was more than three times the Australian cost of living. It was reasonable to predict that the focus of Rebecca's family might have shifted from cultivating love to pursuing money, and perhaps to the extent of compromising other important values that sustain and make each family member thrive happily.

Geographically, Hong Kong is a small cosmopolitan city with a dense population. Ordinary people live in high-rise apartments where pets are either not allowed or unsuitable for their habitats. Few people (rich or elite) can afford to live in the country-side in individual houses with gardens. Rebecca said they adopted one dog that came voluntarily; but she bought two more dogs because she liked animals. Rebecca admitted that they both wanted a bigger house, perhaps to accommodate the dogs and a growing family. She reported that they also wanted more comfortable lifestyles and were always striving to work as much as possible whenever there were performing or teaching opportunities. Rebecca described her husband's work ethic:

We built our music school from ground zero without much capital. Tim believes because his original family was unable to financially sponsor his business



empire that he had to work so hard for it. He was not happy about it. I thought initially that he is just a workaholic who is passionate about building his reputation. Later Tim wants to work regardless of real financial needs. He wants to become rich in the shortest time possible. A lot of performing arts students do music for money. It is the institutional culture that the students care about getting performing and accompanying jobs more than their studies.

Rebecca believed that Tim's desire to earn as much money as possible was an act to boost his self-esteem resulting from an oppressed childhood. In Rebecca's understanding, Tim was resentful that his original family did not financially sponsor his school and he regretted not being able to become rich earlier. Based on Rebecca's narratives, I believe that materialism has become a focus in their marriage. Rebecca recalled that they often had arguments over their differential materialistic pursuit:

Tim hates that I restricted his spending on PCs and camera equipment, I think he is trying to make up for a lost childhood when he didn't get any luxury items because his family was poor. Now that Tim doesn't love me; he bad-mouths me to our friends, saying that I am a lazy woman who has a maid to do the chores, and I enjoy life on his hard-earned money. To him, buying and owning expensive, branded products seems to be able to counterbalance his inferior ego. I kept telling Tim not to spend so much money on material things; he just wouldn't listen. I told him to save money for our future, but he said he will not bother about the future, he lives for today. Tim is chasing after money, power and fame; he even wants to become a great person. He would be very happy if he could earn a lot of money from the music school and the annual tours of his orchestra.

Based on Rebecca's perception that Tim "lives for today," it was not hard to understand why he spent so much money for the sake of personal enjoyment. Rebecca said Tim accused her of being "the lazy woman" who enjoyed the fruit of his hard work. It was possible that Rebecca might have a special indulgence as well. On the road of recovery, Rebecca would have to come to terms with reality. My role was to create a scenario for Rebecca to discover the truth in multiple perspectives; otherwise there would be no closure to her divorce if she continues to see herself as the only victim. There is a Chinese saying that— "there are no unbroken eggs in a tipped-over nest" meaning that no family member can be spared from the damage of a divorce.

### **Faith Abandonment**

According to Rebecca, their marriage disintegration was related to their faith abandonment. Although the couple are Christians, Rebecca thought that they slowly drifted away from Christian values which advocate loyalty and harmony in marriage; she explained:

I became a Christian during high school. When I first met my husband, he appeared to be a righteous person, but he might have pretended to be a Christian for a substantial part of his life. He came from an extended Christian family with the paternal grandparents being elders to a church that they founded. His parents did not really practise as born-again Christians. They have a lot of superstitions regarding the fēng shuǐ of their house. During the Chinese New Year, they had to work out which direction they must walk toward when they

step out of their house. I think that the second and third generation of Christians in this family hold superficial beliefs and do not treat their religions seriously. During our courtship, Tim said he was angry with the church ministers whenever he broke up with his girl-friends. I was foolish...could not detect his unfaithful inclination in relationships. All along, I thought I could trust him.

From Rebecca's recollection, Tim's family never really practiced true Christian values. However, Rebecca was blinded by her love for Tim perhaps at that time. Rebecca almost blamed herself for trusting Tim; she might have also believed that marrying a Christian man meant that the marriage would/could survive many life crises. I think that everyone is capable of cheating given the right conditions, although many married people consciously choose to remain faithful to their partners even when they are tempted. Rebecca thought that if they had both treated their beliefs and the Christian values seriously, their marriage might not have come to an irreparable end. Rebecca continued to explain:

As a couple, we stopped praying together, or praying individually. We put God out of our lives completely. One time, Tim was sitting in the car, yelling and swelling and saying that he hated this church and the people in it who were so fake.

I think a life without God would go downhill. We stopped praying, and detached from God in practice. We only prayed in church; spiritually we did not grow anymore. When he left us, I said we got married in a church with God being our witness. Tim said that he had not been a Christian for a very long time.

Rebecca's Christian beliefs facilitated her interpretations of her circumstances; and her religious practices determined her gender role or identity within her marriage. She attributed the failure of her marriage to Tim's superficial faith as he declared that he "hasn't been a Christian for a very long time." But Rebecca was also accountable because she agreed to "not praying individually or together as a couple." Perhaps Rebecca took on the role of a full-time mother by willingly giving up her career, and abiding by the Christian teachings that the husband is the head of the familial hierarchy in marital submission (Nash, 2006). Thus, the politics of religion prevented Rebecca from challenging Tim's authority, power and spousal conduct (Tarc, 2016). She never protested about what she perceived to be wrong in a Christian family, where collective praying and regular family worship were missing. Perhaps after Rebecca lost her ability to earn money, her self-esteem also fractured and she felt inferior to her husband. It is fair to say that the couple had made a decision that their faith was not their top priority. Rebecca said she might not have been a very good wife because she invested quality time in her children rather than in her marriage.

### **Prioritizing Children's Education and Parenthood**

It is an established phenomenon in Confucian Heritage Culture that Chinese people value education very highly (Chen, 2006; Li, 2001). Chinese mothers aspire to be superwomen who are self-sacrificing and invest a lot time supervising their children's learning, in addition to efficiently running large extended households (Chao, 1996; Chao & Aque, 2009). Tiger-mums or monster parents have been a popular discourse in modern Asian societies where parental concern/control is perceived in Western psychological culture as excessive (Eng, 2015; Fung, 2016a). In a Confucian society there is a common saying that "Children's school failure is the mother's fault; their misconduct is the father's fault." Full-time mothers have

cultural obligations to supervise their children's learning; whereas fathers must set moral examples for the family because they are the heads of their families. In Hong Kong where tertiary education entries for young people are extremely competitive; parents suffer a serious degree of anxiety associated with parenting (Chan, 2012). At the first stage of pregnancy, potential parents will begin to research kindergartens for their un-born child. As soon as the child can talk, he/she will be coached to answer kindergarten interview questions in order to be selected into competitive schools. Hong Kong children typically have after-school learning activities ranging from academic tutoring to sports and music for up to six/seven days a week.

Rebecca reported that parenthood brought conflict to her marriage as her identity evolved. Ever since she became a mother, her role as a wife was perceived by her to occupy a lower priority.

I might have invested too much time in the children. We send our children to a private and highly competitive girls' school; and most mothers in this type of schools tend to be full-time, self-sacrificing and devoted mothers. Maybe Tim felt that his needs were not met and I did not care about his life after the birth of the two kids. I was very concerned with my children's education. Tim seemed to be happy and was proud of the academic achievements of his daughters. He said that I should just quit teaching, otherwise the girls won't be able to keep up with the high benchmarks they reached at school. I am an anxious parent; the additional pressure was self-imposed but I couldn't change my nature. If I work outside home, I could take breaks. But being a full-time mother, I was on the highest alert 24/7; it was a nerve-wracking experience for me; I worry too much. When my younger child began primary school, I should have more free time to be myself again. Unfortunately, my marriage couldn't wait and didn't survive this testing time.

Although Rebecca was aware that investing all her time in her children could damage her marriage, she did not make a concerted effort to readjust her lifestyle to cater for Tim's needs. Rebecca's worrying nature was also unhelpful in the situation. The irony was that Rebecca was led to believe that solely dedicating her time and effort to supervising her daughters' home learning was the right thing a mother should do. It is common for women to quit their jobs and become full-time wife-mother after childbirth in Chinese culture. Rebecca did not realise that following her cultural norms would cause serious tension in her marriage (Su & Hynie, 2011). Tim apparently encouraged her to quit cello teaching; Rebecca could have taken this as a signal that she had the full support of her husband to indulge in parenthood and prioritising their children's education over their marriage. I suspected that Rebecca would modify the way she parented her children even if Tim did not approve of her parenting practices. Rebecca said she "couldn't change her nature" and her worries "were self-imposed." As her identity continued to evolve from a married woman to becoming a single-parent, Rebecca developed strength and constructed meaning through her transformation. In the second interview, Rebecca was honest enough to take ownership of her aspirations for her daughters and the way she chose to parent them:

I care about my daughters' education over everything else to the point of neglecting Tim's needs. I feel that I have given up my career for my children; I need to put more effort into training them and helping them with their studies. For all the hours that I put into helping my children, the reward is that my oldest daughter has always come first in class, ranked as top student among her peers. Sometimes, I laugh at myself and wonder if I did the right thing as a wife, a

mother, or a woman? My daughters' consistent achievement was beyond my expectation; I did what I had to do because I love my children. My older daughter is self-motivated to learn, she does not need anyone to push her; the younger one needs more help. I feel I do all the dirty work behind to help my children academically; my husband is openly proud of my older daughter, but perhaps secretly resentful of me not paying enough attention to him.

Rebecca said that her husband was proud of the older daughter's achievements without mentioning that she must have also been proud of her. I think the common denominator between the couple is that they both held a "wishing for dragon children" belief which is the cultural norm in Asian countries, including post-colonial Hong Kong (Wu & Singh, 2004). Rebecca might be replicating her own parents' behaviour of emphasising the importance of education as the means to future financial security. The fact that Rebecca gave up a career that she worked so hard for, to cater for parenthood was a major stress factor in her life that she might not have consciously realised at the time; although Rebecca said that she "worried too much." Such anxiety was manifested in her over-aspirations and high expectations for her children's education. When Rebecca reported that she could have more free time to be herself after the younger daughter began school hinted that she knew that devoting 100% of her time to her children over everything else was unhealthy and may even be pathological— she had lost her identity as an individual. Metaphorically, like the scorpion who must sting or poison the frog as they both tried to cross the river; their nature drove them to their eventual death. Rebecca lost a life-partner, her children lost their father; and Rebecca continued to wonder if she did the right thing as a wife-mother-woman. Her ongoing negotiation of her identity changes from adolescence to adulthood; from performing artist to home teacher; from wife to parent; and from married woman to divorcee would likely to continue over time (Yep, 2002; Montemurro, 2014). When Rebecca is ready to move on from her marital conflict, she would have to reconstruct her new identity while simultaneously considering her own wellbeing (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). She needs to reimagine becoming a professional artist or a music educator again, and to navigate the dual identity of being a career woman and a single-parent.

### **Diverging Lives**

In the first interview Rebecca reported that the couple had the biggest fight after the birth of their first child because the family dynamics had completely changed. Rebecca described how it played out:

He was not used to having a new-born baby at home. Because he worked until late hours due to the nature of music teaching; he could not provide help to me as a new mum. We employed a domestic helper, and had my mum living with us from that time on to help with child rearing and chores. We also have three dogs. That was a lot to take in. He felt he lost his significance as a man and husband in the household. Instead, fatherhood with the financial burden to feed a big family took over his life.

Evidently, the couple's marriage was slowly disintegrating because Tim "had lost his significance as a man and a husband at home." Their marriage breakdown leads onto the discussion for a much bigger social issue. It was not unreasonable for in-laws to be living with married couples especially after child births; this is a cultural norm and practises widely among Chinese families. There is a saying that "Having an elderly at home is like having a precious

treasure”— the grandparents can look after the young ones while the adults go out to earn a living to support a large household. At the same time, the third-generation children learn the Chinese value of filial piety by observing how their parents respect and take care of their aging grandparents (Hwang, 1999). After the arrival of a new-born, the family would inevitably focus on the baby and the recovery of the mother; often the father can become irritated and overjoyed simultaneously. Tim tried to adjust his lifestyle to accommodate the needs of five people and three dogs. In addition, he had to work even harder to cater for the new financial expenses. Slowly, the couple went separate ways with diverging lives. Rebecca explained:

He told me that he found it to be overwhelming with so many responsibilities. I think our marriage came to an end because we had the wrong ideas of what each other expected to get out of the marriage. I had incorrectly invested my time in marriage playing the role of a dependant wife who ceased to bring home income. I lost track of what Tim did during the day. When he came home at 12 am, our daughters would have gone to sleep. We were not growing together and neglected each other's needs. Tim felt that he had to deal with too many things in and outside home, it was overloading him beyond his limit. Tim always worked on Sundays because that would be the busiest day for music tutors. I tried to convince him to have Sunday reserved for family, but he didn't listen; so I took my older daughter to church by myself. A few years later when my younger daughter turned three, I told him that he needed to take all of us to church as a family. He then decided to take Sundays off, but he hated the big crowd in public venues on Sundays.

Tim was almost coerced into taking Sundays off by Rebecca to spend time with the family although he said he felt “overloaded in and outside home.” Perhaps in Tim's mind, it was easier to bury himself at work than coming home to deal with the emotional demands of a wife, two daughters, a mother-in-law, a maid and three dogs. At work, Tim could earn admiration and gratitude from his students/colleagues plus money, and feel great about his achievements. By contrast, he did not receive much acknowledgement at home because Rebecca admitted she “neglected Tim's needs.” From Rebecca's point of view, she was not wrong to ask Tim to take time off work for their family to repair the marriage because “they were not growing together.” On Sundays, Tim was physically there with the family, but he was not keen about the togetherness. As Rebecca reflected on their diverging lives, she told me that she thought Tim did not need his family anymore, because he did not enjoy spending time with them.

Even when he had spare time, he didn't spend the time with us. A few years back, I gradually realised the slow changes of Tim detaching from us emotionally and physically. Before marriage, he said he liked children. In recent years, he would rather spend his spare time at home surfing the internet or playing with his phone. The girls would try to hug him when he was home very late at night, because they could stay up late on Fridays; but he wouldn't hug them back. Later, he decided to sleep at the music studio. His excuse was that he finished teaching at 10:30 pm on Fridays and would recommence teaching at 8:30 am the next morning; it was easiest to not come home at all. On Saturdays after orchestral rehearsal in the late afternoon, he could come home and have family dinner with us. Instead, he chose to have a meal with his students and colleagues.

With little time spent together, the couple each lived an independent life in absence of the other. Rebecca knew Tim was living a separate life for years, but she could not do anything about it because she was busy surviving parenthood, and adjusting her identity change from a professional woman to a full-time mother. Evidently this marriage had not been fulfilling physically, socially, emotionally and perhaps sexually for both Rebecca and Tim. To me the observer, this home had a symbolic “broken hole” that had not been mended, over time it became easy for intruders to get in. Tim’s decision to call for a divorce was incidentally triggered by his extramarital affair with an old friend. Rebecca reported:

Tim decided to leave us for this woman soon after the extramarital affair happened. It took two months before I noticed his behavioural changes. In the middle of the night, he would drive off. Or when he came home, he continued to make phone calls very late at night or stared at the lap top screen for hours. One day, Tim said he would die if he stayed inside the house. He sounded as if he was the victim of our marriage; he admitted that he had found someone else and he had spent all his married life compromising his needs. Tim said I was the sole person who caused the marriage breakdown because I was a lazy woman who didn’t earn an income and didn’t do any housework because we had a maid. He believed that he was “a slave” that worked to death for our family.

Rebecca thought that Tim saw himself as “a slave” in their marriage. My understanding of this metaphor is that most if not all slaves would wish to get out of slavery to escape oppression. The couple’s marriage came to an end as they continued to accuse each other for their wrong doings. The affair might have been a short-term fling; and the “forbidden apple” acted as a sexual stimulant which led him to believe that he was still a desirable man to the opposite sex. Tim’s ego received a pseudo-dose of flattering; and he decided he did not “have to compromise his needs” for his young family. In the long run, Tim must come to the realisation that he could not blame Rebecca to be “the sole person who caused the marriage breakdown” because “it takes two to tango.”

To protect the anonymity of their identities, I would not write about their intense arguments or court cases any more. Tim and Rebecca each had their own reasons to rationalise for what happened, but they must learn to deal with the aftermath of their divorce to ensure that they spend quality time to cultivate the emotional wellbeing of their children, as well as rebuilding their own lives independently (Larson & Richards, 1994). Rebecca and Tim need to relinquish all past ties, disengage from one another as an individual of significance, abandon the portrayal of a happy couple and re-establish new ones as solely the parents of their children. I believe every family member involved was a loser, no one could come out of a divorce with clean hands. Divorce is regarded as the second most severe stressor in the Holmes-Rahe Scale which was a stress and social readjustment scale designed by psychiatrists (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In terms of emotional pain, death has a reading of 100, whereas divorce is 75 (Gadoua, 2012). Divorce can sometimes hurt more than death because death brings full closure, whereas the divorcees are usually alive to become a source of stress to each other continuously. My role was to enable Rebecca to see that she was the victim and offender at the same time, so was Tim—the oppressed was the oppressor too. Both Rebecca and Time need to own their share of their co-constructed stories before they can move on with life.

### **Researcher Reflections**

In the process of writing Rebecca's story, I am conscious that research is more than just data collection; the wounded-healer standing by the wounded is therapeutic for both of us. As a reflexive researcher, I am aware that the interpretation of findings is done through my eyes with my cultural understanding which may assist or hinder the co-construction of knowledge, so the effects of this on the research process have been carefully monitored and recorded in my journal (Cloke et al., 2000; Drake, 2010; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). I bracketed my own experiences and beliefs from the data, and maintained a balance between attachment and detachment from Rebecca, as I described and simultaneously interpreted her narratives (Gemignani, 2011; Pillow, 2003). I was in a continual dialogue with myself and critically aware that my positionality including my age, gender, psychological training, career stages, and my personal biases associated with divorce may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Padgett, 2008; Stonach et al., 2007). I had reservations on how much to disclose because of what might encourage or discourage Rebecca (De Tona, 2006; Valentine, 2007). Symbolically Rebecca and I are fellow travellers on the same journey, treating research as emancipation from the mental bondage of divorce. This person-centred or ground-level approach is very important, especially in sensitive ethnographic research concerning divorce—it is a taboo that may/should not be debated openly in some cultures. In Confucian-patriarchal societies, divorced women are said to have brought on shame to their ancestors; they are socially stigmatised (Fung, 2016b). Very often they are blamed to be the sources of their marriage breakdown. To complicate the matter, the politics of religion seems to be adding an extra burden to the abandoned Christian wives. In Rebecca's case, she reported that she feared God more than ever and was anxious that God would punish her for her failure in marriage, as well as her ill thoughts about Tim. Rebecca said "It was not fair that Tim, who committed adultery did not fear God." In contrast, she lived in constant fear and felt that God needed her "to be punished even further." It was this self-destructive thought pattern that led me to have earnest concerns for Rebecca's deteriorating mental health. I urged her repeatedly to seek psychological counselling and checked on her progress through regular messaging.

Over time both Rebecca and I may appear to be at least partially recovered; but the pain can come back again if changing circumstances upset our equilibriums and trigger some old demons within us. Total recovery is going to be very slow like the peeling of an onion; each layer shed will bring forth tears. We may be confident and happy one day and stumble the next day. One thing I hold dear is to be kind to ourselves and those who have offended us, this releases us from self-victimisation and helps us to take responsibility to be well and happy again.

Twelve months after the initial interview, Rebecca's divorce proceedings completed. She had successfully transitioned to working outside home that she loved and loathed after more than a ten-year break from the work force. The family moved to a smaller apartment within walking distance to the daughters' school. The children's extra-curricular activities had also been reduced to ease the family's financial burden. Rebecca took on instrumental music teaching at three schools and gradually adding workload to her private cello tutoring. On the surface, it is good for Rebecca to regain self-esteem through work that brings financial security. She becomes the bread-winner, the father-mother or sole parent to her children, the nurse to her mother and the dedicated teacher to her students. With the growth of her multiple identities, Rebecca must learn to manage her time wisely to also cater for her own needs—spending time to recover from the internal damages because the impact of the divorce would continue to linger long after the split. Hopefully Rebecca's acute stress will not develop into chronic emotional problems that affect her daily functioning (Gadoua, 2012).

In this study, I explored the relational ethics and care of the researcher and research as emancipation, as I engaged with ongoing messaging with Rebecca. I acknowledged the freedom and my choice-making responsibility that extended the project boundary to improve the wellbeing of my participant. I was aware that crucial dates on the calendar such as festivals where families typically gather could be especially burdensome for Rebecca; I texted her during such times like Easter, Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, Christmas and Chinese New Year to check on her psychological health. Rebecca would reply and say that she was either making positive progress with her local counsellor, or she was devastated by the red tapes in the divorce proceedings and paralysed by the outcome of the court hearing. I continued to encourage her to see her counsellor as well as taking her children to see family therapists, to resolve the unsettled issues related to divorce. Over my eighteen months of conversation through messaging with Rebecca, we had developed a strong tie that transcends time and border.

There are very limited things that I can do for Rebecca from Australia; but I have decided that a warm smile (emoji), some sincere greetings with appropriate questions can probe Rebecca to continue to tell her stories that will liberate her, and bring healing to her wounds (Fung, 2016b). This is the essence of qualitative research, with unanticipated life changing consequences that transform the researcher, the participant, and global readers who might share a similar experience. This study can initiate a robust dialogue among qualitative researchers looking for alternative and humanistic ways to conduct research. Globally divorce statistics are constantly on the rise. Health-care workers must acquire multiple perspectives regarding this phenomenon, including intercultural understandings and religious practices, to serve families effectively. The current findings are congruent with prior research that in-depth interviews are transformative and therapeutic (Beck, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 1994; Murray, 2003). In addition, they are of relevance and interest to scholars, social workers, and relationship professionals working on intervention (and prevention) programs with families going through the metamorphosis of marriage disintegration, separation and divorce.

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